

REPORT DOCUMENTATION PAGE				Form Approved OMB No. 0704-0188	
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1. REPORT DATE (DD-MM-YYYY) 09-02-2004		2. REPORT TYPE FINAL		3. DATES COVERED (From - To)	
4. TITLE AND SUBTITLE "Who bravely dares must sometimes risk a fall" The balance between tactical and operational risk in war				5a. CONTRACT NUMBER	
				5b. GRANT NUMBER	
				5c. PROGRAM ELEMENT NUMBER	
6. AUTHOR(S) LCDR Chris A. Higginbotham  Paper Advisor (if Any): Professor Patrick C. Sweeney				5d. PROJECT NUMBER	
				5e. TASK NUMBER	
				5f. WORK UNIT NUMBER	
7. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES)  Joint Military Operations Department Naval War College 686 Cushing Road Newport, RI 02841-1207				8. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION REPORT NUMBER	
9. SPONSORING/MONITORING AGENCY NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES)				10. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S ACRONYM(S)	
				11. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S REPORT NUMBER(S)	
12. DISTRIBUTION / AVAILABILITY STATEMENT Distribution Statement A: Approved for public release; Distribution is unlimited.					
13. SUPPLEMENTARY NOTES A paper submitted to the faculty of the NWC in partial satisfaction of the requirements of the JMO Department. The contents of this paper reflect my own personal views and are not necessarily endorsed by the NWC or the Department of the Navy.					
14. ABSTRACT:  Recent events in Operation Iraqi Freedom have made it clear that at least on some level the United States has embarked upon a change in policy to reflect the acceptance of greater tactical risk in consequence to reducing operational risk. This transition by the United States to a more risk acceptant posture is a situational approach to risk management and not a doctrinal change. It is based on the desire to break the adversary's perceived patterns of U.S. action (and reaction) and retain both diplomatic and military initiative on the world stage and not as an augury of all future conflicts. Tactical risk can be a necessary consequence of this type of shock and surprise approach, yet only when coupled with careful analysis and operational planning can its full utility be recognized.					
15. SUBJECT TERMS Risk, Operational vs. Tactical Risk in War, Prospect Theory of Risk, Decision making.					
16. SECURITY CLASSIFICATION OF:			17. LIMITATION OF ABSTRACT	18. NUMBER OF PAGES 25	19a. NAME OF RESPONSIBLE PERSON Chairman, JMO Dept
a. REPORT UNCLASSIFIED	b. ABSTRACT UNCLASSIFIED	c. THIS PAGE UNCLASSIFIED			19b. TELEPHONE NUMBER (include area code) 401-841-3556

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“Who bravely dares must sometimes risk a fall.”<sup>i</sup>

The balance between tactical and operational risk in war.

By

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A paper submitted to the Faculty of the Naval War College in partial satisfaction of the requirements of the Department of Joint Military Operations.

The contents of this paper reflect my own personal views and are not necessarily endorsed by the Naval War College or the Department of the Navy.

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## **ABSTRACT**

Recent events in Operation Iraqi Freedom have made it clear that at least on some level the United States has embarked upon a change in policy to reflect the acceptance of greater tactical risk in consequence to reducing operational risk. This represents a change from the way in which United States forces have historically trained for sequential attrition based, vice simultaneous maneuver operations.

The transition by the United States to a more risk acceptant posture is a situational approach to risk management and not a doctrinal change. It is intended to break an adversary's perceived patterns of U.S. action (and reaction) in order to retain both diplomatic and military initiative on the world stage and not as an augury of all future conflicts. Tactical risk can be a necessary consequence of this type of shock and surprise approach, yet only when coupled with careful analysis and operational planning can its full utility be recognized. To win you must risk, but this acceptance of risk cannot be based on bravado. Instead it must be the result of reasoned study by well trained professionals. When training does not match execution, success becomes a casualty.

## **INTRODUCTION**

Events in Operation Iraqi Freedom have made it clear that at least on some level the United States has embarked upon a change in policy to reflect the acceptance of greater tactical risk in consequence to reducing operational risk. This represents a shift from the way in which United States forces have historically trained for sequential attrition based, vice simultaneous maneuver operations.<sup>ii</sup> The value and danger of this approach is reflected in the requisite willingness to accept the possibility of dramatic reversal and increased casualties as the proverbial sword of Damocles hanging over the promise of every swifter and more “catastrophic victory.”<sup>iii</sup>

The transition by the United States to a more risk acceptant posture is a situational approach to risk management and not a doctrinal change. It is intended to break an adversary’s perceived patterns of U.S. action (and reaction) in order to retain both diplomatic and military initiative on the world stage and not as an augury of all future conflicts. Tactical risk can be a necessary consequence of this type of shock and surprise approach, yet only when coupled with careful analysis and operational planning can its full utility be recognized. To prove this thesis we will examine pertinent risk concepts, modern risk theory and two historic case studies, comparing and contrasting their relevance with Iraqi Freedom. The conclusions of this analysis will demonstrate the wisdom and portents of current U.S. risk management and operational planning to the conduct of future operations.

## **CONCEPTS OF RISK**

Merriam Webster defines risk as the “possibility of loss or injury, and/or the act of being exposed to a *usually specified* danger or loss.”<sup>iv</sup> In war the risks are not always well defined and leaders must chose between options that promise maximum and minimum gains

with associated best and worst outcomes. If all possible dangers or risks were known at the outset then military decision making would be very simple indeed, however this is rarely the case.

A careful analysis is essential in balancing operational risk in planning against the counterweight of tactical risk to the combatants in execution. One of the dangers of discussing a concept as expansive as risk is that it can mean different things to different people. One might assume that risk between the operational and tactical levels of war is directly proportional, i.e. as operational risk increases, tactical risk would grow in the same direction and at some proportional coefficient of magnitude. In other words, if you plan a bold operation, it will require bold tactics to achieve success; following this logic it appears that risk is increasing on both levels of war. This argument, though accurate to some extent, misses the true nature of interplay between them.

In reality, the relationship between operational and tactical risk should be defined as *inversely proportional*. If one accepts that operational risk is normally associated with the planning and allocation of assets to an area of operations, and that tactical risk is dictated by how those plans and assets are utilized on the field of battle, then it follows that anything that increases the chance of the operational plan succeeding decreases the risk of its failure and thus reduces operational risk. As an example, suppose that you were to develop an operational plan calling for an amphibious landing followed by a move inland to seize currently unoccupied territory commanding a vital road junction. Opposition on the beach is expected to be light, but there are significant un-located enemy forces suspected to be in close proximity. The tactical commander must make the choice of when to move inland from the beach based on their risk acceptance. The commander can move immediately with the

small forces initially available upon landing and risk being overcome by the un-located enemy (high tactical risk), or he/she can build up the beach head and move inland when their forces are fully assembled reducing the risk of tactical defeat, but accepting that the enemy may have time to occupy and defend the objective territory (low tactical risk). In this case, the rapid move toward the objective, though courting greater tactical risk for the unsupported force, also promises the greatest odds of fulfilling the objective of the operational plan (the seizure of the designated territory). By this logic, the acceptance of greater tactical risk reduces the chance for operational failure, and consequently lowers operational risk.

History is replete with examples of the delicate relationship between operational daring and tactical recklessness. In the United States' most recent conflict, Operation Iraqi Freedom, the question arises as to whether or not there is a departure from the perceived post-Vietnam tradition of military tactical risk aversion (no friendly casualties) to a doctrine of greater risk acceptance in consequence to reducing operational risk. Was John Paul Jones correct when he said "It seems to be a law of nature, inflexible and inexorable, that those who will not risk cannot win."<sup>v</sup> If you accept the validity of this statement and its reference to our concept of tactical risk, then how much risk is too much? How does a commander determine for a given situation what that metric should be? And, most importantly, is an increase in tactical risk an imperative to dramatic victory? This paper is not of sufficient scope to furnish complete answers to all of these difficult questions, though they must at least be acknowledged in order to frame the discussion. The focus of this paper is upon the motivations and utility of operational risk balancing and the consequences of a shift in tactical risk acceptance by the United States as evidenced in Operation Iraqi Freedom.

## **RISK THEORY**

The core of the problem is whether or not we can accurately determine risk through a rational examination process? Though couched in the nouveau terms of the day, the human process of risk assessment has not change substantially since Alexander the Great had to ponder the wisdom of crossing the Hydaspes in the face of Porus's army. However, to grapple with this issue we must first gain an understanding of how contemporary risk management tools work. For reasons of brevity we will limit our discussion to Prospect Theory (PT)<sup>vi</sup>. "Unlike utility, or normative theories, which describe what people ought to do (and as such can function prescriptively),"<sup>vii</sup> PT is an empirical or descriptive theory. "Descriptive theories refer to what people actually are doing; thus, no normative implications can be drawn from descriptive theories. What people do can be right or wrong; telling them it is better not to act that way does not help change what they actually do."<sup>viii</sup> Further, "PT predicts that individuals tend to be risk averse in a domain of gains, or when things are going well, and relatively risk seeking in a domain of losses, as when a leader is in the midst of a crisis."<sup>ix</sup> It is a situational approach allowing that although a person may have a tendency toward action or indolence, they will still make choices about risk based on a series of situational judgments. PT relies upon two phases; framing and evaluation. Framing "looks to find the ways in which choice or option can be affected by the order or manner in which it is presented"<sup>x</sup> (i.e. is the choice affected by the half-full vs. the half-empty presentation). The evaluation phase consists of placing a value on an option in terms of gains and losses with reference to a situational moving reference point (as conditions change, the point of reference may change), and weighting the available options by multiplying the value of each option by its decision weight. One interesting aspect of weight in risk analysis is that PT tends to over-weight low probability outcomes and under-weight high probability outcomes.<sup>xi</sup> For

example, many people are terrified of flying in an airplane, though they have no fear of getting in their car. The reality that their risk of dying in a car is statistically much greater is undervalued, while their fear of the risk of the aircraft is overvalued.<sup>xii</sup> The last concept that must be understood in PT is that of “domain”<sup>xiii</sup> This refers to the perceived realm of gain or losses within which an action takes place. For the purposes of PT, domain is restricted to a sense of whether the actor in question perceives (subjective) him/herself to be in a position of gains or losses.<sup>xiv</sup> In essence, PT is a situational theory. The choices made to accept risk rely less on a person's normative patterns of behavior and more on the stimuli that are affecting the choice at that moment.

In the operations examined below, the risk decisions are accurately supported by Prospect Theory. Although these decisions were made by individuals who were risk takers or risk averse by nature, each viewed their respective conflicts as unique situations requiring risk assessments based on specific judgments, and as such could not necessarily serve as normative truths for their conduct in future conflicts.

### **HISTORICAL ANALYSIS**

Is a shift to a more pervasive doctrine of tactical risk an imperative to dramatic victory? The tomes of military history are lined with quotes extolling the necessity of boldness in risk taking, however the rows upon rows of grave markers in military cemeteries around the world decry the reckless application of such idioms. We will examine two historical cases well separated in time and circumstance in which the disproportional application of operational to tactical risk (or vice versa) resulted in very adverse results. Finally, Operation Iraqi Freedom will be contrasted with both to see how it fits the historical model and if a meaningful conclusion can be drawn from these experiences.



The allied invasion of Sicily in 1943, code named Operation Husky, was a classic example of the failure to capitalize on overwhelming advantages due to a reticent and passive operational plan. On the surface it would seem an obvious case for advocating the acceptance of greater tactical risk to abbreviate the associated operational risk and increase the probability of overall success. There are literally scores of reasons for the less than spectacular results obtained by the Allies in Operation Husky, including a dysfunctional command and control structure, poor communication, bad planning, the super-infusion of political actors, professional jealousy, and generally short sighted objectives.<sup>xv</sup> For our purposes it is necessary only to look at a few poignant examples that clarify the argument of risk. There is a tendency among planners to place considerable stock in planning for the worst case scenario, and theoretically it seems logical that if you have prepared for the worst you should be able to handle anything less. However, this process must contain the essential caveat of the most *likely and reasonable* worst case. That is to say, it is possible that a tsunami will develop and destroy your invasion fleet, but it is not reasonable to plan for this and it is certainly not likely unless you have some scientific data supporting it as a significant probability.

A far less ridiculous example of this kind of thinking is found in the planning for Operation Husky, and though not as extreme, the effect was not much less on the operational objectives. In this case, it was an insistence upon the exaggerated threat posed by two German divisions postulated to be in Sicily. It is interesting to note that even though the plan itself was modified from a more aggressive multi-axis landing to a more limited mutual support plan, it never included an attack on the primary objective of Messina (see Figures 1 & 2), which should have been the key to isolating the German / Italian Center of Gravity (the

German Divisions in Sicily). From a simple map study it becomes obvious why Carlos D'Este wrote in his analysis of Operation Husky that:

The boldest and most important option was never seriously considered by the Allied Planners. Amphibious landings along the Messina and Calabrian coasts along with secondary landings in southern Sicily would have immediately left Axis forces in a hopeless position with their lifeline--the Messina Strait--sealed off to reinforcement and to escape. <sup>xvi</sup>

The Allies failure to attack Messina was later criticized by the German commander in Italy, General Kesselring as “incomprehensible.”<sup>xvii</sup> Moreover it became abundantly clear that “throughout the planning for Husky the allied planners accorded their Axis adversary greater respect then circumstances justified.”<sup>xviii</sup> General Marshall, the United States Army Chief of Staff, argued with General Eisenhower, the overall allied commander for the operation, that “the element of surprise and Axis disarray might justify your accepting calculated risks.”<sup>xix</sup> Marshall himself lamented “that orthodoxy had replaced the boldness which had won great victories for Nelson, Grant and Lee.”<sup>xx</sup>

This is an important observation, as it brings up a point particularly relevant today. One could question whether our current pedagogy encourages a similar risk adverse attitude. United States forces are trained to utilize their superior technology to reduce the threat prior to engaging a target. Commanders are keenly aware of the consequences

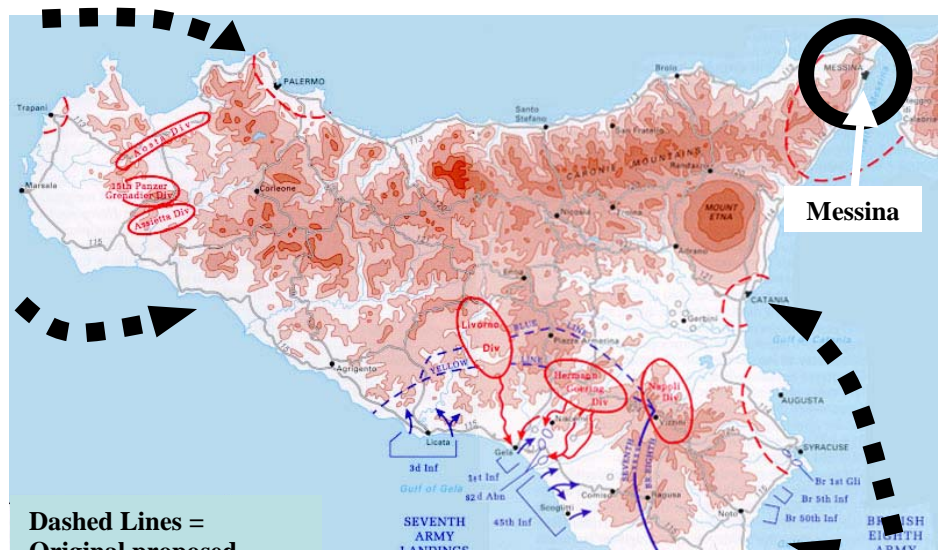


Figure 1. Map of Sicily 1943-proposed landing (Source: <http://www.lib.utexas.edu/> )

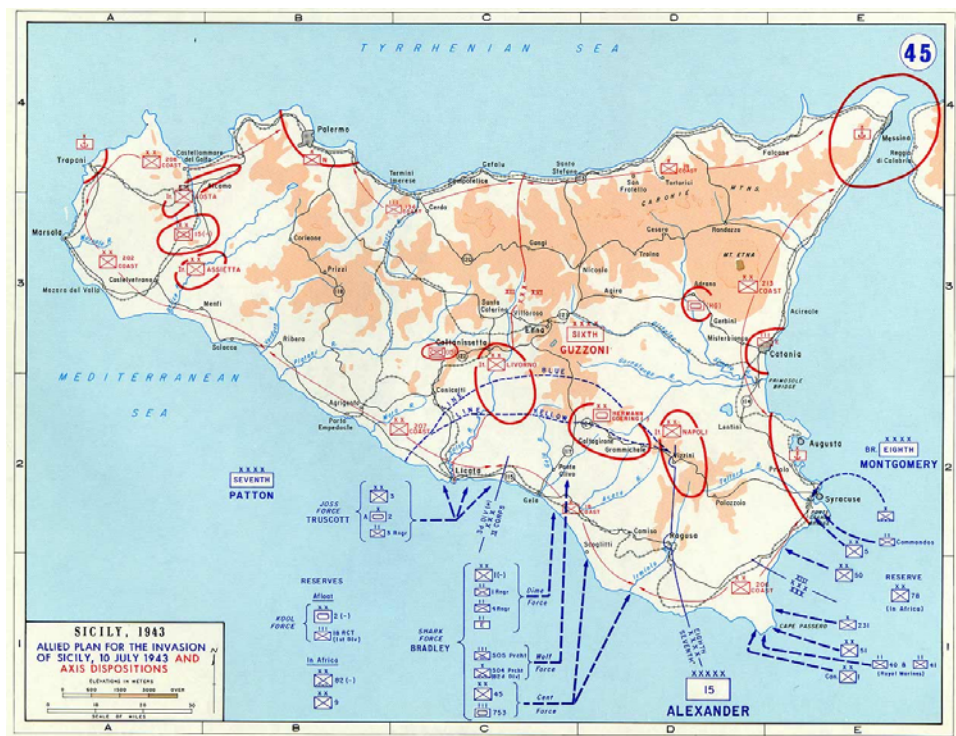


Figure 2. Map of Sicily 1943 (Source: <http://history.sandiego.edu/> )

of friendly casualties. This has given rise to the refinement over time of the tactically risk adverse practice of methodical and sequential reduction of enemy forces. The problem with

this, as it was in Sicily, is if your enemy does not chose to sit static and wait for you to finish destroying him, you may find yourself in difficulties. Not the least of which is the time devoted to ensuring that you have diminished the enemy's capabilities and the metric for ensuring it has actually been accomplished. This is in essence the situation in Sicily in 1943. The final plan agreed upon by the Allies for Operation Husky was for a single axis attack with the British forces under General Montgomery landing in the south east (Pachino Peninsula) and driving north to Syracuse, Catania and eventually to Messina, while the Americans under General Patton would land on the south coast (Gulf of Gela), seizing several airfields and supporting the left of the British advance. It was rather naively hoped (or at least paid lip service) by Montgomery and General Alexander, the overall allied ground force commander, that the Germans and Italians would sit tight and allow themselves to be trapped between the two advancing forces and thus be cut off from escape.<sup>xxi</sup> For an enemy whose martial capabilities were continually overestimated, this assumption of a complete absence of situational awareness seems preposterous. The mutually supporting drive from the south was the least tactically risky option available, yet it also offered the least promising operational results. The attack, which Montgomery felt would take a few days, took over a month and even with a 10 to 1 advantage in men and near complete air and naval superiority, all German divisions escaped intact from Sicily with their tanks and equipment. These troops would contribute materially to the long drive up the Italian Peninsula in the months to come.<sup>xxii</sup>

The predominate failure by General Eisenhower and General Alexander to establish a clear Desired End State at any point in the planning resulted in a perverse reversal of the planning process where by the attack on the island became the *objective*, instead of the attack

supporting the objective of cutting off and destroying the German divisions on Sicily. It became evident that as events began to unfold in Sicily; both Army commanders found themselves without either a firm plan of action or guidance from Alexander. There existed no overall master plan of campaign, no agreed strategy (however loosely defined) for the conquest of Sicily.<sup>xxiii</sup> In this case, no acceptance of tactical risk would have alleviated the situation. There are certainly instances where a bold maneuver (such as the use of amphibious forces for out flanking the defenses)<sup>xxiv</sup> might have helped, but this plan, resembling a car coming out of the factory with no wheels, was never going to run no matter how hard the accelerator was depressed! The lack of guidance fatally flawed the process even before planning began.

One could point to the very risky airborne operations undertaken during Husky and their tragic consequence to see that tactical risk unsupported by sound operational planning does nothing but raise the toll human of suffering and death.

From the viewpoint of Prospect Theory, the Allies in Sicily had just completed a successful operation in North Africa. They had won the battle of Britain; they were winning the battle of the Atlantic, and the Germans were hard pressed in Russia. The winds of war were blowing in favor of the Allies. There was no real exigent for the invasion of Sicily. Its conquest would not materially change the outcome of the war, nor would it overly impact the Russian theatre of operations. From this perspective its purpose appears mainly political. To retain the perception of action by the Allies and to fore stall the impatient Americans from embarking upon a premature invasion of the continent. Framed in this way it is easy to see General Eisenhower as being in a domain of gain. There was no imperative for this operation and nothing substantial to be gained from the countenance of greater risk. It was

more important at this stage to simply avoid defeat. To have accepted more risk would have increased the odds of a catastrophic failure, which Eisenhower must have feared more than anything else. Operation Husky is an ironic and sad case of a tactical victory, and an operational defeat. In the words of author Carlo D'Este, "Sicily ought to have served as a clear warning to the Allied leadership that faint-heartedness and the absence of clearly defined strategic [Operational] goals was a recipe for future setbacks."<sup>xxv</sup>

The concept of tactical risk vs. operational risk is certainly not limited to wars of the 20th or 21st centuries. The battle of Saratoga during the American War of Independence in 1777 serves as an excellent historical counterpoint to Husky of the danger of overweighing the risk equation from the opposite side. The British forces in North America were in a somewhat similar position to the Americans in Iraq in 2003. They were an established world power with a striking asymmetrical dominance over their adversary. In England's case, this took the form of sea power, military material and wealth over the struggling American colonists. The only force they lacked was a large expeditionary land army, but they felt that their small professional force, augmented by European mercenaries would be more than a match for their provincial opponent.<sup>xxvi</sup> They were dealing with a habitual sore spot in their empire and a source of much needed commodities (timber, sugar, etc.). The economic consequences involved were severe, yet nothing compared to the diplomatic loss of face and prestige (which is worth a great many muskets if your enemies are overawed by the thought of fighting you). The quick victory hoped for by the English government had escaped them in the two years of sporadic fighting since 1775. What was needed was a bold plan to end the war quickly.

Domestic support was waning and the associated expenses of the war were mounting exponentially with no end in sight. Public opinion around the world was beginning to question, if she were such a great power, why England could not seem to control what General Burgoyne was to describe as “a rabble in arms swept by success into insolence.”<sup>xxvii</sup> For all these reasons and more England looked for a dramatic military answer to her problems. The solution seemed to reside in a plan conceived by many, but successfully championed by General Burgoyne, then the deputy commander in Canada. The plan as described by author Robert Furneaux was as follows:

As originally conceived, the plan called for the advance of the two armies from Montreal and New York City to affect a junction at Albany. Such a move would have established a chain of strong posts from the St Lawrence to the Atlantic isolating New England. This was a bold, imaginative design which was feared by the colonists who foresaw the dangers of such a conquest. In 1775 the Provincial Congress of New York wrote to the Continental Congress at Philadelphia: ‘If the enemy persist in their plan of subjugating the states to the yoke of Great Britain, they must, in proportion to their knowledge of the country, be more and more convinced of the necessity of their becoming masters of the Hudson River, which will give them entire command of the water communication with the Indian nations, effectually preventing all intercourse between the eastern and southern confederates, divide our strength, and enfeeble every effort for our common preservation and security.’<sup>xxviii</sup>

General Burgoyne would move south with approximately 8,000 men from Canada and General Howe, the overall British land force commander in the colonies (or his subordinate General Clinton), would move north to affect a juncture in Albany with roughly 10,000 men (see Figure 3). Burgoyne, like many of his contemporaries doubted the capacity of the colonists to wage *modern* war. Although he had witnessed their tenacity at Bunker Hill and acknowledged that “their defense was well conceived and even covered with bravery and military skill,”<sup>xxix</sup> still “Burgoyne continued to despise the military capabilities of the colonist, and he doubted their resolution.”<sup>xxx</sup> His confidence was such that he even

placed a bet with the Brooks Club in London that “within the year I shall return from America victorious.”<sup>xxxix</sup> The stage was set for a momentous victory. He was certain that the colonists could not adapt to the rapid and determined movements of the British armies. He felt that if pressed hard enough, they would break and run. All that remained was to coordinate the plan with the various commanders and set it in motion. In contrast to the Allies’ plan for Husky, the initial operational plan was well developed and struck at the heart of the colonist center of gravity, the communications between colonies (information and economic). The tactical risk was great in that the forces involved would be geographically separated and unable to provide mutual support. The lines of communication would be long and it would be essential for Burgoyne to move swiftly to join the southern force since re-supplying his army in Albany through the winter from Canada would be impossible. The operational gain promised by such an acceptance of risk was enormous. The war might be ended with little material loss in a relatively short span of time. With much of the colonial population still loyal or undecided, the enticing prospect of recouping all that they had lost and re-establishing the profitable business as usual loomed large in the halls of parliament and the court in England.<sup>xxxii</sup>

As with many ventures that start with great promise, this one fell victim to its own self-promotion, poor communication, and greed. General Howe himself stated that his principle objective of the campaign of 1777 was “opening up a communication to Canada, by occupying the line of the Hudson so as to launch an attack upon the heart of the rebellion in New England.”<sup>xxxiii</sup> This would seem to support the idea of a juncture of armies at Albany laid forth in Burgoyne’s plan; however this was not to be the case. General Howe had requested additional forces from England to effect the operations in America for 1777.



Unfortunately, he received only a small part of what he deemed necessary to fulfill his obligations.<sup>xxxiv</sup> Accordingly, he began to change the plan, unbeknownst to General Burgoyne. Howe had intended not only to send troops to Albany, but to march against Boston and Philadelphia as well as to garrison Road Island and New York. When the forces to accomplish these designs did not materialize, he began to re-allocate his resources. He canceled the plans for Boston and rationalized that the Northern army could support itself until he had completed operations against Philadelphia.<sup>xxxv</sup> He hoped to invest the capital of the colonies as well as split them in half in one fell swoop. In this his reach exceeded his grasp. Although he reasoned that Burgoyne's army could fend for itself, at least until he could afford to send forces north, a careful map study leads one to reject the practicality of this.<sup>xxxvi</sup> In the words of Sir John Fortescue; "Howe was left with directions to attack Philadelphia, and Burgoyne with positive and unconditional commands to advance to Albany and there place himself under Howe's orders....never was there a finer example of the art of organizing a disaster."<sup>xxxvii</sup> It was felt that the colonist could not draw together a large enough force to stop Burgoyne's advance. It was this strength of idea that continued to push him south even when it should have become clear that he could not hope to proceed. "However much Burgoyne may have paid lip service to the designs of the grand strategy (the junction of two armies on the Hudson), he believed he could reach Albany on his own...."<sup>xxxviii</sup> He decided to continue knowing that he would be advancing great distances through enemy held territory with a slow moving column, over rough roads, with complete dependence upon joining the main British force before his supplies gave out. He was also at least partially aware that the force he depended upon for his survival was committed

elsewhere with an unsubstantiated time table for supporting and provisioning his army.

Boldness had become recklessness.<sup>xxxix</sup>

The results could almost be foretold in advance. Burgoyne committed a large and overburdened force in a desperate race for which it was ill equipped, and which he could not hope to sustain over the distances involved. From the moment that Howe chose to change the focus of the operation from the Hudson River to Philadelphia, the operational planning that had held such promise was lost. The tactical risk that was found acceptable in the original plan became a scandalous sacrifice of men and equipment. The end results of this change of plan were far more dramatic than could have been imagined. Not only was Burgoyne's army lost, but the colonists gained credibility in the court of world opinion that would have been impossible without this victory. France would overtly throw in her lot with the colonists, setting in motion a future American/French combined operation that would spell the end of English control in America.

From a Prospect Theory point of view, the English in 1777 had been a true world power for less than 20 years and the window of opportunity for them to successfully conclude the war in North America was quickly sliding closed. Opinion in Europe was shifting and old enemies were licking their wounds and eyeing the opportunity to avenge past grievances. They needed a spectacular war ending operation. They were clearly in a domain of loss. They were willing to gamble and to accept greater risk in order to stay



Figure 3. Map of Saratoga & Philadelphia campaigns 1777

(Source: <http://www.authentichistory.com/>)

off what they rightly perceived as serious future consequences. From the perspective of the commander, the prospects for General Burgoyne were fading as well. He had risen from

obscurity to great heights, but his continued success was predicated upon a great victory in America. He was willing to bet it all on one chance for glory. This takes us back to the lesson we have already seen. Tactical risk (courage), no matter how great, cannot by itself promise victory if it is unsupported by sound and consistent operational planning.

In March of 2003, the United States, in coalition with 48 other nations, embarked upon Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF) to enforce United Nations Resolutions and remove the government of Saddam Hussein in Iraq.<sup>xi</sup> Though overwhelmingly successful in the combat phase, this operation shares some fundamental similarities with Husky and Saratoga. Political expediencies aside, the critical similarity lies in the evolution of the operational plan. Without entering the world of classification, it is possible to infer that despite its “catastrophic success,”<sup>xli</sup> OIF suffered from some of the same major plan revision seen with disastrous results before. The obvious question then becomes; why didn’t OIF fail? What was different that prevented history from repeating itself? Was it luck, skill, speed, overwhelming combat power, a strict adherence to the principles of war? The short answer is YES. The longer answer requires slightly more amplification. To be sure war never exactly follows the defined straight lines of a power point flow chart, but it would be rather naive to assume the United States was prepared for all the changes it would have to make to its operational plan for OIF. The original ground scheme of maneuver was for a multi-axis attack (see Figures 4 & 5), with the main ground thrusts coming from the 3<sup>rd</sup> Infantry Division and the 1<sup>st</sup> Marine Expeditionary Force in the south attacking North through Kuwait, and the 4<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division attacking south out of Turkey into Kurdish held Northern Iraq. The eleventh hour diplomatic/political determination by Turkey to prevent the use of its airspace and territory for the conveyance or support of Coalition ground or air

forces led to a radical change in plans. With 20 days before the actual start of the offensive, the coalition was faced with planning and executing a major operation with, the loss of all significant ground forces in Northern Iraq and the immobilization of nearly 100 aircraft at airbases inside Turkey.<sup>xlii</sup> As noted by Tom Donnelly in his appraisal of the combat phase of OIF, “going after a bloody regime in possession of weapons of mass destruction without 25 percent of your land combat power—and without any certainty of rapid reinforcement if things went badly—ran the risk of catastrophic failure when measured by traditional yardsticks.”<sup>xliii</sup>

By all accounts the Iraqi forces should have leveraged their advantages of numbers, terrain, and internal lines of communication to hazard the Coalition plan. They could have released dams to inundate lanes of advance, destroyed oil wells to create obscurity and economic desolation, employed Scud missiles and SAMs with proclivity, utilized their WMD capabilities, attempted massed air attacks the carriers, etc., but they did none of these things.<sup>xliv</sup> Why? Certainly the speed of the Coalition advance and the precision of their attacks would have limited the Iraqi ability to coordinate offensive and defensive actions, but on their own were they sufficient to have led to the widespread failure to orchestrate any organized defense? It is possible that Coalition success was more a combination of what the Iraqis didn’t do as well as what the Coalition did? In testimony before the U.S. Congress Dr. Stephen Biddle, associate research professor, U.S. Army War College stated that:

The skilled use of modern coalition technology interacted synergistically with Iraqi errors to produce unprecedented lethality and a radically one-sided military confrontation. Given this synergy, our skill and technology would probably produce similar results against other enemies as unskilled as the Iraqis, and with friendly forces no larger than 2003’s. But because both technology and a major skill imbalance are required, even the same coalition skills and technology would probably not produce comparable results against a more skilled opponent.<sup>xlv</sup>

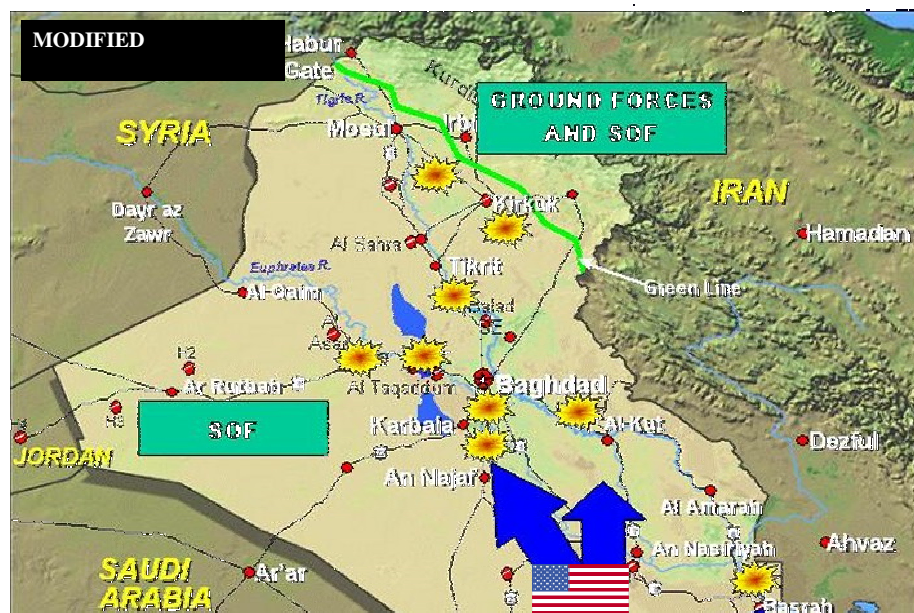
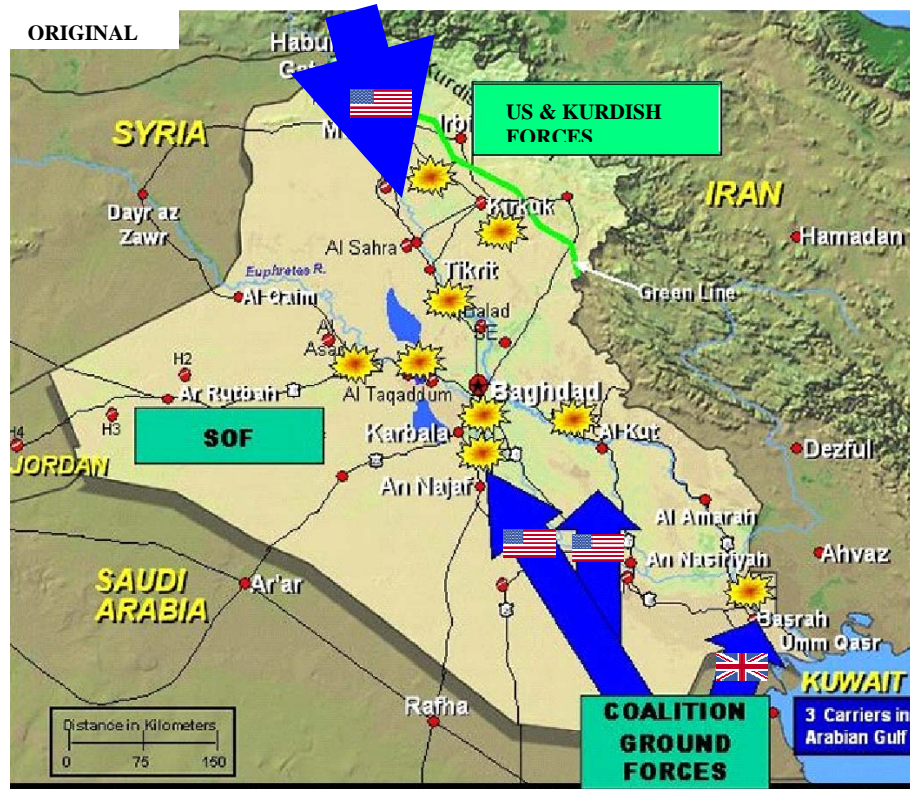
In other words, the acceptance of greatly enhanced tactical risk was justified by the situational circumstances of this conflict. However, since there are no guarantees that these exact conditions will exist in a future conflict, OIF cannot be used as a cookie-cutter solution.

In OIF the Coalition acted in part due to the expected perceptions of the Iraqis about the way the United States fights: As Tom Donnelly, postulating on Iraqi predispositions, stated in his article, *Audacity Works*, “They will never attack with just four [actually less] divisions. Their most capable ground unit couldn’t deploy in Turkey and will take weeks to get in through Kuwait; we’ll see them coming. And we know there will be an extended air campaign before the ground attack begins.”<sup>xlvi</sup> These anticipated Iraqi perceptions inspired the Coalition commanders to start the ground offensive ahead of the air campaign, and prior to the arrival of the redeployed 4<sup>th</sup> ID. It also prompted initial attacks deep inside the air defenses of Iraq without the usual sequential degradation of air defenses. In effect, the American forces fought in a manner that no one was accustomed to seeing them do. It was a shock to those who participated as well as to those who were on the receiving end of the effects. In the words of Admiral Vern Clark, “This war ain’t like the last war, and it ain’t like the next war. It is like this war.”<sup>xlvii</sup>

From a Prospect Theory viewpoint, America was riding the bow wave of popular support for the war on Terror, yet one could say that as time passed and no new terrorist threat materialized (whether due to active prevention measures or not) support for continued aggressive operations was waning. The failure to capture or kill Osama bin Laden in Afghanistan lent frustration to the public demeanor. The need to act quickly against the shadowy threat in Iraq could be seen as an imperative least public support wane and the self



serving efforts of some of our historical Allies shift the balance of world opinion against the American leadership. On a more practical note, the more time allowed, the greater the preparations of the enemy and the further into the summer the campaign would drag, when temperature and climatic conditions would greatly diminish



Figures 4 & 5. Maps of Iraqi Freedom (Source: <http://www.globalsecurity.org/>)

the effectiveness of Coalition forces. Framed in this light, the United States could be seen to be in a domain of loss, and thus be expected to be risk acceptant.

### **CONCLUSION**

The lessons that should be drawn from the three operational vignettes are that although an element of tactical risk is essential to successful operations, it is not a simple equation of more equals better. Instead it is a function of how well the operational concept is defined and planned as to whether the acceptance of additional risk is warranted. In Husky, it is unlikely that any level of risk would have salvaged such an unsound operational plan. In the case of Saratoga, if the operational plan had simply been followed, the results of the increased tactical risk could have led to spectacular results for the English. The common thread in both these situations is the relation between risk assessment in operational planning and tactical risk allowance in execution. The proper equilibrium in either of these operations would have led to very different outcomes. One could argue that in Operation Iraqi Freedom we see a much more balanced relationship between operational planning and



tactical risk. The final modified plan, thought greatly enhancing the tactical risk, still clung to the basic precepts of the original and the additional risks were not partaken of blindly. Increased tactical risks were only accepted as a means to increase the likelihood of Operational success (Speed of advance). Good information exchange, a robust C4I structure, and excellent intelligence exploitation allowed for more educated judgments to be framed quickly and with less subjective interpretation by the commanders. The apparent aggregate lesson is that increased risk, when mated with carefully crafted situational based operational planning, grants greater probability of spectacular success. The key analysis of risk management planning is that acceptance of increased tactical risk must further the achievement of the operational objective. If it does not meet this metric then the risk should not be undertaken.

It is also clear that the United States, though more acceptant of tactical risk, has not committed to a doctrinal shift away from risk aversion so much as it has acknowledged the validity of risk evaluation from a situational perspective. The question of how much risk is too much will always plague the rational commander. It is a question that must be answered during the operational level of planning and which, never yielding to simple formulas, should remain a matter of subjective analysis and a willingness to adapt to new situations. As an opposition commander once remarked; “having studied Allied strategy, no attack will be launched until they have achieved complete air superiority; as this can not be maintained solely by aircraft carriers, it is obvious they will require land based planes as well.”<sup>xlvi</sup> One might imagine this statement coming from an Iraqi general on the eve of OIF, but these were the words of Field Marshall Kesselring in 1943 prior to allied operations in Sicily. He accurately predicted where and when the Allies would attack based on their previous pattern

of behavior. Sixty years later the Iraqis, using this same logic, were dramatically mistaken. The willingness to break with perceived patterns of behavior in order to maintain initiative cannot be overstated. In the words of Ulysses S. Grant "I don't underrate the value of military knowledge, but if men make war in slavish obedience of rules, they will fail."<sup>xlix</sup> To win you must risk, but this acceptance of risk cannot be based on bravado. Instead it must be the result of reasoned study by well trained professionals. When training does not match execution, success becomes a casualty. In the words of Thucydides, "A nation that draws too broad a difference between its scholars and its warriors will have its thinking done by cowards, and its fighting done by fools."<sup>1</sup> Finally, the United States must be willing to accept the prospect of loss. As the title of this paper implies, the possibility of a fall must inevitably be one of the consequences of risk.

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## **NOTES**

- i Tobias Smollett (<http://www.creativequotations.com/> [January 5, 2004]).
- ii Richard Halbleib, No Guts No Glory—Operational Risk Taking: Gaining and Maintaining the Tempo (Fort Leavenworth: USACGSC, June 1990), 36-37.
- iii Donald Rumsfeld, DOD News Briefing 11 April 2003, DOD News Transcript (<http://www.dod.gov/transcripts/> [January 15, 2004]).
- iv Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary (<http://www.m-w.com/> [January 6, 2004]).
- v University of Minnesota Communications Department Website (<http://www1.umn.edu/umcf/> [January 12, 2004]).
- vi Rose McDermott, Risk-Taking in International Politics: Prospect Theory in American Foreign Policy (The University of Michigan Press, 1998), 15.
- vii Ibid., 13.
- viii Ibid.
- ix Ibid.
- x Ibid., 20-21.
- xi Ibid., 31.
- xii Ibid.
- xiii Ibid., 37.
- xiv Ibid.

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- xv Carol D’Este, Bitter Victory: The Battle for Sicily (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1943), 71-91.
- xvi Ibid., 76.
- xvii Ibid.
- xviii Ibid.
- xix Ibid., 77.
- xx Ibid.
- xxi Hugh Pond, Sicily (London: William Kimber and CO, 1962), 219.
- xxii D’Este, Bitter Victory, 548.
- xxiii Ibid., 321.
- xxiv Ibid., 559.
- xxv Ibid., 552.
- xxvi Michael Glover, General Burgoyne in Canada and America (London: Gordon & Cremonesi, 1976), 28-40.
- xxvii Robert Furneaux, The Battle of Saratoga (New York: Stein and Day, 1971), 21.
- xxviii Ibid., 19.
- xxix Ibid., 22.
- xxx Ibid.
- xxxi Ibid., 23.
- xxxii Ibid., 15.
- xxxiii Ibid., 23.
- xxxiv James Lunt, John Burgoyne of Saratoga (New York & London: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1975), 116.
- xxxv Furneaux, The Battle of Saratoga, 25.
- xxxvi Glover, General Burgoyne in Canada and America, 115-117.
- xxxvii Fortescue, British Army, vol. III (London: Macmillan, 1903), 208.
- xxxviii Furneaux, The Battle of Saratoga, 28.
- xxxix Ibid.
- xl White House Press Release 3 April 2003 (<http://www.whitehouse.gov/infocus/iraq/news/> [January 15, 2004]).
- xli Donald Rumsfeld, DOD News Briefing 11 April 2003, DOD News Transcript (<http://www.dod.gov/transcripts/> [January 15, 2004]).
- xliv Andrew F. Krepinevich, Operation Iraqi Freedom: A First-Blush Assessment (Washington: CSBA), 11.
- xlvi Tom Donnelly, “Lessons of a Three Week War: Audacity Works”, The Weekly Standard, Vol 8, No. 32 (<http://web.lexis-nexis.com/universe/> [January 18, 2004]).
- xlvii Stephen Biddle, “Operation Iraqi Freedom: Outside Perspectives, Prepared Testimony before the House Armed Services Committee, Federal News Service, October 21 2003 (<http://web.lexis-nexis.com/universe/> [January 20, 2004]).
- xlviii Ibid.
- xlvix Tom Donnelly, “Lessons of a Three Week War”.
- xlvi The statement was attributed to Admiral Clark, the Chief of Naval Operations, by General John Jumper, the Air Force’s Chief of Staff, during a meeting with the author, May 12 2003.
- xlvi Pond, Sicily, 22.
- xlvi John Russell Young, Around the World with General Grant (New York: American News Company, 1879), 125.
- <sup>1</sup> Robert B. Strassler, The Landmark Thucydides Trans. by Richard Crawley (New York: Touchstone, 1990), 427.

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